

Promise to continue fighting for expanded health care and homelessness prevention projects for veterans in rural areas

(Mankato, Minnesota) – U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki joined Congressman Tim Walz today in Mankato to tour facilities dedicated to rural veterans' health care and homelessness prevention. The Secretary and Congressman heard from veterans about the need to build upon existing VA services and further expand health care in rural areas. The tour began at the VA's Mankato Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC), which currently does not provide primary health care services to area veterans. The VA is in the midst of the contracting process to expand the CBOC to include these much-needed services. The tour concluded with a stop at the Radichel Townhomes in Mankato. The townhomes are long-term supportive housing for disabled homeless veterans constructed and managed by the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MAC-V).

"Too often, rural veterans experience challenges accessing VA care simply because they do not live in a major metropolitan area," said Congressman Tim Walz. "Rural areas are not just communities that haven't figured out how to become large cities – we choose to live here because of the quality of life. For veterans, choosing this lifestyle shouldn't mean forgoing access to high quality VA care. Secretary Shinseki understands this and has been leading the VA in expanding access to care for all Veterans."

Lyle Pearson of North Mankato, an 89 years old veteran, was held as a Prisoner of War in Germany during World War II. Lyle has been going to the VA medical facility in Minneapolis since he returned from combat in the 1940s. However, in the past few years Lyle has been unable to travel 3 hours round trip from his home to Minneapolis due to his health and the hardship of having to be away from his ailing wife for the entire day. "This primarily clinic would be good for veterans because it is right here, close to home, where we can get to our doctor easier and faster," said Mr. Pearson.

Tom McLaughlin of Mankato is a Vietnam veteran who lost a leg in combat. He has been going to the Minneapolis VA hospital for 42 years, driving himself back and forth. "For myself and other Vietnam veterans, it is getting more and more difficult for us to travel to the Twin Cities," said Tom McLaughlin. "It only makes sense to provide more services closer to home. We have a large college student population in town including many younger veterans with military service-connected injuries. My son, who is a veteran of the War in Iraq, goes to college in Mankato and has a family. With a full course load of classes, he simply can't afford to take a day off and drive to the Twin Cities for medical care appointments. The more care we can provide here locally will help these students complete school and get the care they need."

In addition to access to VA services for rural veterans, the visit also focused on homeless veterans in the area. "Secretary Shinseki is a true champion for veterans and has dedicated his time at the VA to addressing homelessness in our veteran population and rural VA care for veterans," continued Walz. "Today, our goal was to show him the MAC-V program that is doing wonders for our homeless veteran population so he can use their example as the VA crafts new policies to provide shelter and services to our homeless vets. Additionally, the time we spent today with local veterans and at the CBOC gave the Secretary a clear picture of what it is like to be a rural veteran trying to access VA services. As we work together to improve access to care for all veterans, and especially for rural veterans, I hope today's visit will inform his future decisions."

"Congressman Walz and the Congress have provided strong leadership and support to our Nation's Veterans and VA," said Secretary Shinseki. "The Congressman's support for enhanced VA budgets has expanded veterans' access to top quality health care in rural areas throughout the country. Today's discussions gave me an opportunity to learn more about the local efforts to help end Veterans homelessness and the innovations occurring here in Minnesota."

Secretary Eric K. Shinseki is a retired U.S. Army General and former Army Chief of Staff. Congressman Tim Walz is a retired Army National Guard Command Sgt. Major and serves on the House Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Lyle Pearson's story is available on the Minnesota Legion's website at <http://www.mnlegion.org/paper/html/pearson.html>

Radichel Townhomes

Radichel Townhomes are run by the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans, a Minnesota non-profit entity. MAC-V provides structured assistance programs to veterans to ensure they can overcome their challenges, rebuild personal relationships, and return to being productive members of the community. In 2006, the Radichel Townhomes, 11 units of permanent supportive housing were opened in Mankato. They are funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, state and local government grants, private donations and contributions from local veterans service organizations.

Mankato VA CBOC

The current CBOC in Mankato provides only limited services to area veterans. The CBOC opened in 2008 and is undergoing an expansion process that will bring primary care services to the clinic. Southern Minnesota has an additional primary care CBOC in St. James and a larger primary care CBOC facility in Rochester. Congressman Walz has been a strong advocate for expanding Mankato's CBOC.

